2: Belgrave G-8 (1945) 1946 MD1 Syria MD1
Alawite MD7

A VISIT TO SHEIKH SULAIMAN MURSHID, THE ALAWITE "LORD"

By SQUADRON-LEADER RICHARD BELGRAVE

S 648 IN June, 1945, the Alawite province of Syria was in an explosive state. To Major B—— and myself the arrival of H.M. Destroyer *Musketeer* was welcome in the extreme. With half a dozen Signals personnel we had been the only British "forces" in the area. No time was lost in putting her Captain, Commander S——, in the picture, and very swiftly and surely did he grasp the essentials of a highly complex political situation. It was clear that we had to take steps to keep the Alawites quiescent in this quarrel between the Syrian Nationalists and the French, or our efforts to prevent bloodshed could not have been successful for much longer. The story of our doings in this little-known corner of the Levant is recounted as an example of an unusual combined political operation by representatives of all three branches of the Service.

A 101 131 795 S 162 563 The Alawites constitute a religious sect of Islam, numbering some 350,000, and inhabiting the mountains just inland of Syria's 100 miles of Mediterranean coast. They are a minority to be reckoned with in Syrian politics, as they amount to roughly 10 per cent. of the population. In the main division of Islam into the two great sects, Sunni and Shiah, the Alawites are nearer to the Shiahs, while the great majority of the population of Syria are Sunni and nearly all the Nationalist leaders belonged to that sect. It was, therefore, inevitable that the Alawites should be somewhat suspicious of the Damascus Government. Alawite social life is still feudal and their religion secret: a curious blend, largely Islamic, but deriving certain characteristics from Christianity—for example, the belief in a Trinity—and from pagan and pre-Christian cults—for example, belief in reincarnation and the use of groves of trees for places of worship. A [562 774 721] Their prophets include Christ, Muhammad and Ali. Their women are not admitted to religious rites and are not regarded as possessing souls. The Alawites have the mountaineers' fondness for fighting, and have been enabled by their mountain country to preserve their identity through A 622 [511] centuries of alien rule. Their standard of living is low and all but their feudal chiefs are poor. Perhaps the most important of these chiefs at the time of Syria's latest struggle for independence was Sulaiman Murshid, often referred to by the Europeans as "god."

A 822 [illegible] 554 Sulaiman Murshid has never to me claimed to be in any sense a "god." On the other hand, it is estimated that some 50,000 people regard him as the incarnation of the divine and can be said to worship him in the sense that he is their absolute master. The Sulaiman Effendi, as he is known locally, is a shrewd man and knew that I had stated on several occasions that it was a "shame" for a man to pretend to any of the attributes of Allah. He later explained to me that he was the "Rabb" or "Lord" in the sense that he was "lord of the manor." I think, however, that he has on occasion found it profitable to be "the Lord" in as omnipotent a

Sr Belgrave G-3 (1945) 1946 MD1 Syria MD1
Alawite MD7

A 622 792 554 A [79] sense as he could get away with. The story goes that two Alawite priests, whose fortunes were at a low ebb, proclaimed that a dying shepherd boy was the incarnation of Ali. Their idea was to build him a tomb and make it a specially notable shrine to attract large numbers of worshippers. However, the boy, Sulaiman Murshid, survived, and with the aid of one or two ingenious "miracles," which were to earn him the title of "phosphorous boots" in the Royal Navy, he began to build up his reputation as a divine incarnation. He is alleged to have brought forth water from a rock by a contraption of rubber tubes running down inside his sleeve and to have gained many adherents by such wonders. Subsequently the two priests disappear from the story and Sulaiman led a chequered life, during which he greatly increased his land-holdings and therefore his wealth—the Alawite mountains grow the once-famous Latakia tobacco—by somewhat forceful methods. At one time he was on the wrong side of the French Mandatory Authorities and suffered a period of banishment, but he later obtained their favour and in due course became a Deputy in the Syrian Parliament.

S [66] A [55] 669 S 669 When I was posted to Latakia in October, 1944, Sulaiman Effendi was still a Deputy, but very much in the opposition, as he was held in forced residence by the Syrian authorities in Damascus and not allowed to return to his native mountains. He has an agreeable number of wives, one in each of his various villages, but his chief wife, Umm Fatteh, was at that time acting for her absent "Lord" and entertaining lavishly in their mountain residence at Jobit Burghal. Then came an unfortunate difference of opinion between the followers of Umm Fatteh and the local government authorities, the latter's gendarmes sufferlng a reverse at the hands of the former, who were found to be exceedingly well-armed. Such open flouting of their authority was intolerable to the Damascus Government, and they sent up a large force of gendarmes under an experienced campaigner, Commandant Muhammed Ali. The subsequent proceedings were complicated and there was much political activity, but the French sent Alawite and North African troops to Jobit Burghal to prevent bloodshed and remained in occupation up there during the ensuing weeks, much to the disgust of Muhammed Ali, who was confident of defeating the rebels. Meanwhile Fatteh, eldest son of Sulaiman Effendi, had returned home and was able to practise his fluent French on the various French Political Officers whose duties took them to Jobit Burghal. When the fighting broke out in Damascus and it became clear that the Syrians were determined to stake all they had on a bid for complete independence, Sulaiman Murshid found himself in a most awkward position. After a certain amount of political bargaining, he stood up in the Syrian Parliament and announced a complete change of heart, admitted that he had been wrongly guided by foreign advice, and placed himself and all his followers at the disposal of the Syrian Nationalists. Having thus rallied to the cause of independence, he could no longer be detained in Damascus, and accordingly returned home to his mountain fastness. In addition to the French Moroccan force, this now contained a British "tentacle" in the shape of Captain N——, who was camping up there with Jeep and wireless and liaising with all and sundry, albeit finding his French

2x Belgrave G-3 (1945) 1946 MD1-Syria MD1
Alawite MD7

liaison duties less cheerful than they normally are. Sulaiman Effendi's explanations of his *volte face* to the various interested parties must have taxed even his considerable ingenuity. A 669 S

Such was the position as we held our conference in H.M.S. *Musketeer*, and our problem, since the British were now in the last resort responsible for maintaining law and order, was how to convince the Alawite leaders, and especially the biggest potential troublemaker, Sulaiman Murshid, that there was nothing to be gained by violent action. We could not be sure that he fully appreciated the realities of the situation, since news travels slowly into the Alawite mountains, and our French friends were hardly likely to tell him that the British had moved in in force to clear up the mess into which things had drifted. Neither could we be sure that his verbal adherence to the cause of independence had been more than a ruse to get out of Damascus—he had conveniently left just before the French shelled it. We were most anxious that he should support neither side by deeds, since he could put several thousand tough riflemen into the field and was even alleged by the Nationalists to possess automatics and grenades. We decided to go up to Jobit Burghal to visit the Lord in person and sent a wireless message to our tentacle to prepare him for our arrival. 669

We set off in two Jeeps before the heat of the day on Sunday morning. Major B—— of the British Security Mission drove Commander S—— in one, and I followed with Commandant Muhammad Ali, representing the local Syrian authorities. The French-commanded Syrian troops eyed us as we passed their defensive positions on the hill that dominates Latakia on the landward side. The summer heat was already beginning to burn the coastal plain to shades of yellow and brown as we branched off the main road and took the bumpy track that leads up into the Alawite hills. We climbed rapidly, past the spot where a truckload of Syrian gendarmerie had been forced to surrender to some of Murshid's "army" after a two-hour battle. I could not help agreeing with Muhammad Ali that it was a perfect spot for an ambush. Soon we were out of the damp heat of the coastal plain and breathing the cool mountain air redolent of the scrub oaks and aromatic trees and bushes whose smoke is used to give the Latakia tobacco its characteristic black colour. The story goes that about a hundred years ago, when Great Britain imported most of the Alawite tobacco, the villagers one year had a bumper crop, much in excess of the amount ordered for shipment. They stored the surplus, and as they were short of space, hung it in the roofs of their houses. The next year, having a bad crop, they decided to include their last year's surplus, but found it was completely black from the smoke of their wood fires. They therefore concealed it in the centre of their bales, leaving the blond tobacco on the outside. Great was their surprise when word came from England that a new kind of black tobacco had been found in the centre of the bales, was pronounced delicious by the pipe-smokers, and they were to send all they could of it. The smoking is now carried on in special buildings in the mountains, the tobacco being brought up on camel-back to the levels where the trees grow and treated there for several months before being carried down to Latakia for shipment. A 249 439

A 342 712 We jolted our way through the narrow pass commanded by the ruined Crusader castle of Qalaat Mehelbeh, one of the chain of Frankish forts that cover these mountains. Sulaiman Effendi's front drive, though under 30 miles long, climbs 4,000 feet and is only just passable for cars, in spite of forced labour. Muhammad Ali regaled me with tales of past skirmishes, and pointed out the time-honoured defensive positions in the rocks. He knew Sulaiman Murshid well, having once come up to arrest him, and made him walk the whole way down. Presently Major B—— halted on a sharp crest, and a wonderful view lay spread out at our feet. A 133 311 We could see the houses of Jobit Burghal at the bottom of a huge bowl of cultivated and terraced land; they straggled up the further slope, with the Lord's house, white-painted and boxlike, higher than the rest. On all sides rose rock-covered hills, culminating in the summit of the Alawite mountain ridge about 500 feet above the village. It was almost like a "Shangri La" vision in the clear still air, but possessed a far more savage and stony grandeur than my imaginings of that ideal valley.

A 712 Major B——, who had visited Jobit before, told us it was as well to halt at this point, as Sulaiman kept a watcher permanently stationed on his roof with field-glasses, and the track winding steeply down at our feet was covered from the village at every yard of its length. Having given the Lord time to recognize us, down we went and soon came to our "tentacle," Captain N——, camped in an idyllic spot amid trees and rocks a few hundred yards short of the village. He told us that Sulaiman 000 was expecting us and that the French had been informed of our visit. We decided to pay a courtesy call on the latter first, as they were camped in the ruined houses of a rival chief at the bottom of the village, who had unwisely sided with the gendarmes and had had his houses burnt by the Lord's men and his people driven out for his pains. We were met by some junior French officers as frigidly as could be, and after they had told us that their O.C. the Commandant was away we took our leave. Recollecting scorces of happy and fraternal occasions I had spent with my A French friends, I regretted this extremely stilted meeting. We drove off 363 up the village "street," a succession of hairpin bends and steep rocky slopes more like a river-bed than a road, and, rounding a sharp corner, pulled up in the courtyard of the Lord's house.

A 609 576 S [576] Sulaiman Murshid, flanked by his son Fatteh and some of their henchmen, was on the steps and greeted us with the usual Syrian welcome, "Ahlan wa sahlan." His eighteen stone of bulk and rubicund fleshy face bore witness to his enjoyment of the good things of life and his small evasive eyes reflected a somewhat puzzled frame of mind. Indeed, it took over an hour for him to relax an extreme caution as to which way the wind was blowing for him politically. I introduced Commander S—— as the captain of the "mudammera" which was lying in Latakia harbour below, and gave a few indications of her size and power and of the purpose of her visit to Alawite territory. I found later that Sulaiman Murshid became convinced from local rumour that *Musketeer* could land a stream of shells plumb on his house in Jobit, a happy illusion which I forbore to dispel.

000 We were shown into a salon with nineteenth-century French pro-

2; Belgrave G-2 (1945) 1946 MD1 Syria
Alawite MD7

We were shown into a salon with nineteenth-century French pro- 352
vincial-style chairs, sofas and tables, each with its embroidered mats, 291
arranged round the walls in the Syrian manner. Fatteh's white Arab
robes concealed the bulk which the anglicised version of his name so
aptly describes, better than his father's European suit, which, with the red
tarboosh, is the usual dress of the Syrian politician. Conversation was 609
stilted at first, with the Lord carefully leaving the initiative to us and 521
Fatteh putting in a certain amount of flowery French. Sulaiman ap-
peared to prefer discoursing through his son in French rather than directly
in Arabic, and was probably relying on Fateh to make his phrases as
diplomatic as possible. We afterwards learned that his caution was greatly
increased by his thinking that the gold stripes on the shoulders of the
Royal Navy's summer uniform indicated that Commander S—— was a
French officer. It was therefore practically impossible for Sulaiman Mur-
shid, who had recently publicly renounced his French associations and
who knew the British were strongly in favour of Syrian independence, to
decide what to say to his British visitors when they appeared to be accom-
panied by a French officer as well as by Muhammad Ali of the Syrian
Gendarmerie. He kept his end up well, however, and the atmosphere
thawed gradually, partly thanks to the generous tots of whisky which Ali
Sulaiman, chief of Sulaiman's "army," a fine tough specimen with pale
blue eyes, kept serving to all those present. Presently, after eating in- 535
numerable pistachio nuts and a small meal of *mezzé*—*i.e.*, tomatoes, hard- 262
boiled eggs, fried meat off a skewer, etc.—just as an appetizer to the real
business of lunch, there came a rhythmic stamping and clapping from out-
side the open window. Fatteh asked us if we would like to see the
dancing, and we went out on to the verandah.

Thirty Alawite girls, picturesque in their bright-coloured local cos- 291
tume, which consists of a series of skirts, pinafores and shawls in con- 535
trasting flowery patterns, with printed cotton trousers tight at the ankle, 609
were performing a "dobke" with linked arms in a long semicircle.
They chanted a kind of chorus while the leader sang improvised verses,
and they stamped out the measure with their leather slippers on the hard
dusty courtyard. Round them stood an admiring ring of Alawite braves,
their rifles put away for this occasion, who clapped their hands in time
and urged on the dancers. These bold-eyed wenches twisted and turned,
jumped and stamped in a regular monotonous rhythm, and the whole
scene framed in the rugged background of mountains had a timelessness
and a vigour that made it unforgettable. Fatteh, diffidently at first,
translated the words they were chanting in honour of Commander S——,
whose identity had by then been firmly established. It was enjoyable to
watch the Commander's face as he translated:

"The handsome and brave British Admiral has come with his great
ship which has sunk all the German and Italian navies. At the glance
of his eyes all the flowers of the Alawite mountains have blossomed and
the hearts of all the Alawite girls are aflame," and much more to the
same effect.

Lunch was a gargantuan affair with a seemingly infinite succession of 262
meat dishes; Murshid's home-grown wine, followed by French cham-
pagne, helped to some extent, however, to wash it down. We took our

Belgrave G-3 (1945) 1946 MD1 Syria MD1
Alawite MD7

coffee seated on a row of chairs along the edge of the verandah, while the dancers, who had been performing for at least two hours, redoubled their panting efforts. I took the opportunity of having a quiet conversation about the realities of the political situation with Sulaiman Murshid, who was sitting next to me and was now in a much more forthcoming mood. I found he possessed a pronounced sense of humour and was quick to seize any nuance in what I wished to convey to him. He agreed that his wisest plan would be to keep quiet in his mountains and maintain good relations with everyone, especially the Syrian local authorities, until the larger issues of the Syrian problem had been cleared up, after which I undertook to advise the Governor of the province to give sympathetic attention to the settlement of his affairs. I took it as a compliment when at the end of our talk he remarked: "You know, I think you and I ought to go into partnership; we should do well together." Muhammad Ali then got up and made a speech, in which he dealt wisely with ticklish local problems and assured Murshid's followers that the Syrian Government regarded them all as its children and had nothing against them provided they were loyal. They looked a trifle nonplussed at this sudden change from the status of rebels to children. However, when Murshid got up and said a few words to the effect that they must now follow the Syrian Government and struggle for independence, one could feel the extent of his power in their complete acceptance of the new situation. Someone handed the leading dancer a Syrian flag in place of the coloured kerchief she was waving, and we decided to take our leave, having no desire to back one side more than the other in this quarrel but only to prevent further bloodshed. We left Jobit Burghal and climbed up out of the bowl in the mountains somewhat weighed down with a too-large lunch but hopeful of tranquillity in the mountains and stored with memories of an unforgettable day.